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ABSTRACT

A research project surveyed 97 students enrolled in Composition 101 at the University of Illinois, Chicago, in an effort to determine what goes on in the mind of a student faced with three choices of argument topics. The hypothesis was that Topic C--profanity--would be chosen most often and that the reasons cited would be "universality," a personal interest in the topic, and familiarity with it. Topic A--cuts in government funding for education--and Topic B--custody rights of homosexual parents--were considered too specialized and so less likely to be chosen. Students in a freshman composition course answered the questionnaire immediately after choosing and writing the argument. Topic C was, in fact, the least popular choice, with the largest number of writers attracted to B, considering it exciting, controversial, and therefore most arguable. However, for the same reasons, B was considered dangerous, difficult, and disturbing. Students felt that there was not enough to write about and they could not develop arguments for Topic C because it was too general. The hypothesis failed to consider that composition students are able to make metarhetorical judgments, decisions not on the situation of the topic but on the situation of arguing in writing. (SRT)

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Students' Rationale for Topic Choice in Writing an Argumentative Essay

ABSTRACT

Topic as perceived by student essay-writers was examined, using 97 beginning Composition class students. Upon completion of the Department Exam--an argumentative essay written on a topic previously unseen by the students--subjects filled out a questionnaire requesting information about writers' reasons for choosing one of the three topics offered. When salient features that emerged in the "reasons for choice" questions were categorized, the hypothesis that the most "universal" topic--profanity--would be selected by the most students and that a pattern of organization by classification would present itself was disconfirmed. Instead, the majority of students chose the "most controversial" topic--custody rights of homosexual parents--perceiving it as the "most argumentative." Familiarity with topic and strong personal feelings on topic proved to be secondary to argument potential, in topic choice. Both the student writers themselves and teachers who corrected their exams rated the most-chosen topic essays as best. Further, there were more negative verdicts on "how did the topic work out for you" on the other two topics than on the most-chosen one. This study indicates that many students in beginning Composition classes have the ability to make metarhetorical judgments on topics' argument potentiality; it also suggests, contrary to Brossell's conclusions, that topic choice does affect quality of essays produced.

PROBLEM Anyone who has had the task of formulating topics for student essays probably has experienced some bewilderment over the results. The formulator's expectations about topic are very often not met in the papers produced. The topic assumed to be "many-possibilitied" that produces stunted, narrow writing, the topic designed to be argument-eliciting that elicits a narrative instead, the dull and expected topic that unaccountably brings forth fresh, imaginative essays--all these are part of the mystery of topic.

Yet, for all its intrigue, topic has not been much studied by researchers. As Hoetker (1982) points out, most

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research in student writing has taken the topics used to produce that writing for granted. In some cases, the questions or statements given to writers have not even been included in the research reports. For the most part, topics have been assumed to be "functionally equivalent" and "unambiguously representative" (p. 381), and researchers have looked elsewhere for insights into what and how students write.

This neglect has been largely due, of course, to the complexity of variables in topic and the difficulty of separating them, let alone measuring them. A list that only begins to represent all the aspects of topic provides an idea of what has to be handled, eventually, in any complete discussion of effects of topic on writing produced: mode "requested" by formulator and mode perceived by examinee; form of topic (question, short statement, scenariostatement, varying instructions); person used for topic statement ("you" as opposed to "one," or no person specified, for instance); nature of cognitive processing and level of difficulty for a particular group of students; student writers' supposed affinity for personal vs. public content topics; special vs. universal knowledge called for by topic; vocabulary and expression used in topic statment; relationship of any of the previous factors to student's class, race, background, education.

BACKGROUND Research into topic's effect upon writing produced has concentrated on the following five broad categories:

1. Effect of mode upon syntax. Some of the earliest studies (Rosen, 1969) examine the effects of different modes upon writing, with the findings that there is variation in average T-unit length from mode to mode Crowhurst and Piche (1979) observed greater syntactic complexity in arguments than in narratives.
2. Effect of writer characteristics on essay content. Hoetker (1982) reports a British study that shows academic topics producing essays with "disadvantaged" language codes for factory workers as compared with public-school pupils, while essays written on technical subjects show no such disadvantage.
3. Effect of "personal" and "public" topics upon length and syntax. A study of critical argument and personal opinion argument by Nold and Freeman (1977) offered evidence that critical argument (called "public" or "impersonal" in other research) contained more complex syntax while personal opinion essays were longer and exhibited greater variation in responses. Nold and Freeman report significant correlation between length and quality of essays, in this project.
4. Effect of level of rhetorical specification in topic statement on quality. Hoetker (1982) and Brossell (1983)

tested three levels of presentation of topic: Level 1, topic presented as a phrase; Level 2, topic presented as a statement followed by one sentence of instruction; Level 3, topic presented as a scenario with full rhetorical specification. They found that the Level 2 topic statement produced the highest rated essays, while the third level produced the shortest, suggesting curtailment of invention. 5. Effect of high and low cognitive and experiential components of topic upon quality. The work of Greenberg (1981) is closest to the concern of the present study. She combined elements representing high and low experiential content and high and low cognitive-elicitng content (drawn from psychology research) in four different pairings. (For example, the instruction "agree or disagree" is considered high cognitive, whereas "describe" is considered low.) She was unable to discern significant differences, and Hoetker speculates that this was because of the very small and subtle variations in topic wording and (in his view) the over-elaborate instructions that confused subjects and misrepresented the topics.

Only one research project mentioned in Hoetker's review of the research involved questioning the writers themselves about their reactions to topics. Brossell and Hoetker (1981) gave students a choice between two topics--one "private" and one "public," then asked them why they had chosen one over the other. In their estimation, students were inherently attracted to one or the other type of writing. Comments on this issue have been vague. Brossell says, in his levels study, that papers written on Level 2 of one of six topics were clearly the best of the lot, but he leaves any determination of why this was so to speculation: "For whatever reasons, there may have been a particularly congenial match between this topic in this format and the test conditions and examinees in this study" (p. 172).

It is in an effort to find a few of those "whatever reasons" that I have surveyed a group of student writers, trying to determine what, in part, goes on in the mind of a student writer faced with three choices of argument topics.

HYPOTHESIS The hypothesis is that "universal" content, content that every student writer is familiar with, has had experience with, will be the common factor in most of the reasons cited for topic choice. In other words, I believe there is validity to teachers' observations that students perform best with topics they have some acquaintance with in real life, and that this common knowledge (everyone has some experience with profanity) will cause Topic C to be preferred over the more specialized-knowledge Topics A and B. I will also hazard the guess that "perception of implicit structure" will figure importantly, and that "types of hurts caused by profanity" will be the structuring factor in the essay, and

will be mentioned by students as a reason for choosing this topic.

DESIGN Subjects were students taking the Composition 101 course at the Univeristy of Illinois, Chicago. One session of the Department Exam, an argumentative essay to be written on the student's choice of one out of three hitherto-unseen topics, was surveyed. Out of the 133 students who participated in this exam session, 97 completed the questionnaire. The questionnaires were provided immediately upon the handing-in of the completed essay, so that reactions to topics and essays would be fresh in the writers' memories. The following six questions, dittoed on a single sheet, with space under each, for written answers, were included:

1. Which topic did you choose to write on? (Circle one.)
   A. How do you account for the fact that the amount of government funding for education has been decreasing recently?
   B. A parent's homosexuality should not be considered a valid reason to refuse him or her cutody of a child. Agree or disagree.
   C. The use of profanity doesn't really hurt anyone. Agree or disagree.

2. What was your most important reason for choosing this question?

3. List other reasons you had for your choice.

4. Did you choose a different question at first? Which one?

5. If so, what was your reason for changing to your final choice?

6. How did the topic you chose work out for you? Did the reasons you chose it and the expectations you had for it turn out to be right? What new reasons developed along the way?

RESULTS A tally of topics chosen by the total exam group (133 students) showed that 43 students chose Topic A, 57 chose Topic B, and 33 chose Topic C. Of those who completed the questionnaire, 26 chose A, 46 chose B, and 25 chose C. My hypothesis that C would be the most popular choice was wrong; C was, in fact, the <u>least</u> popular choice.

Following is a list of categories that represent the types of information provided by students in their answers to the questionnaire; percentages given represent that portion of those who reported on the questionnaire that they chose that

particular topic. Where numbers, rather than percentages, are included, what is represented is the number of instances in the category (some students may have three mentions of "arguability factors," for instance).

FACTOR		SAMPLE COMMENTS/BASIS OF CATEGORIZATION
Personal importance		
Topic A	38%	Tuition raises are hurting me and my family
Topic B	26%	My best friend's mother is a lesbian
Topic C	44%	Sure of my feelings on this topic/ moral family background
Public importance		
A	15%	2 students praised topic for being "not personal"/involving "no strong feeling"/ mention of public good
B	15%	Homosexuals are treated badly in this society/human rights
C	36%	Corruption of modern society/ freedom of speech
Rejection of other two topics		
A	58%	Didn't care about B or C--had received "worse grades" on "topics I didn't care about"/profanity "too general"
B	37%	Didn't know enough about A and didn't have much to write on C
C	44%	A and C "looked very specific"

Information/Knowledge available

	positive comments	negative comments
A	1 most familiar 1 recently discussed 7 examples come to mind	8 lack of knowledge/"I do not have the datas" 2 don't know about gov't 1 too broad and vague
B	1 didn't have to have too much info 2 recently discussed/ seen on TV 2 examples come to mind	3 lack knowledge about homosexuality and/or parental custody rights 1 don't know any homosexuals
C	1 "more popular" 6 common info/knowledge 6 examples come to mind	3 too general/not enough to say about it

Perceived Essay/Argument Potential

I. Reasons/Ideas/Development

	positive	negative
A	6 had ideas/reasons 2 more points in A	2 not enough strong ideas 2 seemed too simple 1 too general
B	8 more reasons/subtopics/ opinions/ "more meaty" 2 most interesting topic 1 can see "three lines of reasoning"	1 too broad
C	2 "several ideas came to mind"/support found easily	5 too general 1 too broad 2 no "development possibilities" 1 had already written an essay on this

II. Arguability

	postive	negative
A	5 easiest to write about 1 least broad 2 more argumentative 4 type: like to write about "situation"/ like cause-effect/ did not have to use pro-con/ did not have to take one side or other	2 type: "little practice in causal analysis/ did not understand "How do you account for" 1 "looked very specific" 1 "beyond me"
B	3 "clear and concise"/ "not wide open" 1 "general question--I can use my imagination" 4 most controversial/"controversy makes interesting papers" 3 most argumentative 2 prefer this type/ do better on Agree-Disagree questions/ "prefer writing an argumentative essay"	5 would take more time to think about/ organize/difficult 2 mixed feelings interfered with argument 1 afraid teachers would be "touchy" on topic; wanted to disagree, but "was scared" 3 couldn't narrow it down/broad 1 looked very specific

C
- 2 easier to narrow down/ more specific
- 1 more general
- 1 prefer this type
- 2 most exciting/least boring
- 2 topic will make good/ full essay
- 1 definition problem: no general agreement among people on what profanity is
- 6 couldn't find arguments /not much to say about it/only one good point
- 1 conducive to digression: "I could diverge to general topic of words, communication"

Change of Topic

A	31%	(3 from B; 4 from C) C not as arguable/too general; with A "I don't have to argue and side with one side or the other"
B	24%	(6 from C; 5 from A) not much to say about C/too general; "more Opinions" on B than A
C	36%	(7 from B; 3 from A) B would take too long to answer/couldn't narrow B down/ had mixed feelings about B/not enough strong feelings about A

	Affirmed Choice/Essay	Felt Negative about Choice/Essay	
A	46%	27%	
B	59%	11%	
C	64% "The topic and the reasons wosrked out splendidly, indeed"	16%	"As I started to write, my expectations became limited"

Added or Changed Claims/Points/Emphasis

A	27%	"My third cause turned out to be the major cause I developed"
B	35%	"Stimulated some ideas to a topic I never gave much thought to"/ "I learned to be fair to particular people"
C	24%	"It made me think a little bit more"

Total percentage of students who added/changed on chosen topic: 30%

Kept to Original Outline/Plan

A	35%	"My reasons were developed before I started writing"
B	22%	"I did an outline to plan each paragraph"
C	28%	"I had all the reasons when I first started out"

Total percentage of student who kept to original on chosen topic: 27%

DISCUSSION At first glance, the data from this survey may appear so diverse that any tendencies are difficult to discern, and any observer may feel the need to excape into the "complexity" excuse. However, there are certain notable differences in the reasons attaching to each topic, and the developments that emerged as writers took on topics. Initially, it can be noted that there is a lower rate of change in topics for B than for A or C, and that considerable more affirmative feelings were expressed for essays generated from B and C, than for essays on Topic A. Also, Topic B writers reported more "discovery" (premises added/changed) going on during the writing of Topic B. And fewer writers "settled for" B just because they didn't care for the other two topics, whereas a higher percentage came to A and C for that reason. Writers, generally, were attracted to B; it was the topic most often mentioned as exciting, controversial. Because of this perception, many decided it was most arguable. For these same reasons, others decided it was dangerous--its difficulty, the mixed feelings it produced, the fears of teacher disapproval it inspired, all testified to its disturbing qualities.

The impressions of Topic B papers derived from studying the questionnaire are borne out in interviews with 6 teachers whose Composition 101 students took the essay exam. Five reported that the best essays were produced by students who wrote on Topic B, and the sixth said both A and B produced high-rated work. For the first five, the second-best topic was C and the worst was A, in terms of quality of essays produced. For four teachers, a significant number of students wrote better-than-usual essays using Topic B, while those on Topic C tended to produce an essay at their average level. (An interesting contrast to the Composition 101 students is posed by the ESL students who wrote on these topics: the two ESL teachers teaching sections on these topics reported that their students performed best on Topic A. Also, the single EAP teacher who was assigned these topics--essays not reported in the total for this study--found that not one student in her class of 12 wrote on Topic B.)

Looking at reasons given for deciding against a topic is instructive. For many Composition 101 students, Topic A was seen as requiring special information, statistics, special knowledge, and therefore was somewhat undesirable, even though many were attracted to it because of current concern over reduced government spending for education, resulting in cutbacks in assistance funds, raise in tuition, etc. Most students reported having examples at hand for this topic, but the essays did not seem to develop to their liking. Personal involvement and first-hand experience with the effects were not adequate. This can be confirmed by the significantly lower affirmative feelings percentage and higher negative feelings percentage for Topic A.

My hypothesis that the majority of students would select Topic C turned out to be totally misperceived. What I saw as the most familiar, least specialized, and therefore most accessible topic--profanity--turned out to be the one the largest naumber of students complained that they had little to say about, couldn't find arguments for. Student writers saw it as too general, rather than comfortably familiar and accessible, even though personal feelings ratings and public importance ratings were highest for the profanity topic. It is tempting to conclude, reading the questionnaires, that the importance for student writing of personal feelings, relatedness, on the one hand, and principles/values on the other, has been overemphasized; in this instance, at least, the most successful essays were written on the topic with the lowest personal importance percentage and low public importance rating--not to mention the low experiential level, and the supposedly problematic "special knowledge" aspects of the topic of custody for homosexual parents.

The factor that my hypothesis failed to take into account was arguability. Although there were effective arguments written on all three topics, Topic B proved to be (and was regarded as, initially) the most arguable for the most students. The 8 Reason/Ideas mentions might seem to be a factor, but it is not as significant, in terms of percentage, as the 6 for Topic A. The 4 controversial and 3 argumentative mentions under arguability provide the clue to the topic's strength. Only Topic A has "argumentative" mentioned, with Topic C cited for its "good/full essay" traits, not for "argument." And while 6 students complained of being unable to find arguments for Topic C, and 2 complained of not enough strong ideas on A, not one mentioned anything in this category for Topic B.

Ultimately, then, what my hypothesis failed to consider was Composition students' ability to make metarhetorical judgments, decisions not on the situation of the topic (though they do that, too) but on the situation of arguing in writing. This is not to say that all the writers in this study were able to do this, consciously at least. Some students were unable to step outside the situation of the

paper to the extent that they gave reasons supporting their argument as reasons for why they selected the topic. (Example: "Children raised by homosexuals will turn out to be homosexuals themselves" was the answer to "What was your most important reason for choosing this question?") There were 9 examples of this for Topic A writers, 9 for Topic C, and 34 for Topic B! Still, the focus on argument prevailed; the correct perception of the task made arguability win out over the expected-to-succeed personal interest and familiarity with subject. The report of higher quality for Topic B essays--above the students' usual performance, in many cases--may be reason to question Brossell's claim (1983) that topic cannot and does not affect quality.

Essentially, this is a preliminary study--a description and collation of student writers' reactions to topic. Cognitive processes involved--the why of Topic B's being perceived as so arguable, the nature of its engendering powers for ideas, for mid-process change and growth--must be investigated in further research. What seems substantiated by this study is Gebhardt's assertion (1982) that both the linear conception of the writing process and the interaction-between-all-elements-at-all-times conception of the process have validity, for different writers at different times. Some students kept to their original plans, laid out in outlines, while some worked up new claims, reasons, and ways of proceeding as they went along. This is only one bit of information on a complex, difficult subject, which this study has begun to probe, by searching the reactions of the writers themselves.

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